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New Envoy to U.N. Has Long Advocated Going Underground

Vernon Walters Rides Subway
For a Hobby, a Metaphor
For His Diplomatic Career

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NEW YORK—Vernon Walters, the new U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has visited more than 100 countries as a soldier and a diplomat. He often meets secretly with heads of state. Whenever possible, he also rides the local subway.

Subways aren't part of the clandestine arrangements that often characterize his missions. Mr. Walters rides the underground systems for fun; each trip is a new fling in his 50-year romance with the world's subways. He owns nearly 100 subway maps. He subscribes to International Railway Journal, Railway Gazette and French and German publications to learn the latest news about subways in Pyongyang, North Korea, or Mexico City.

When Mr. Walters was the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, station chiefs, hoping to curry favor, regularly sent him new subway maps. Once, a newspaper concluded that the spy agency had a mysterious interest in Europe's subway systems.

"I'm just interested in subways," the 68-year-old Mr. Walters explains. "I think they have great social significance. Anybody who has a comfortable way to go to work is much less discontented with the society in which he lives."

Fitting Metaphor

Underground railroads are a fitting metaphor for the life of Vernon "Dick" Walters. For years, he has operated in the twilight between diplomacy and intelligence gathering, and much of what he appears to be differs from what is hidden beneath the surface.

He moves comfortably in the Ivy League world of diplomacy and national security but never graduated from college. He rose to the rank of lieutenant general in the U.S. Army but, unlike nearly all other general officers, never commanded troops in battle. He is a rugged adventurer who once went to Timbuktu just to say he had been there but is a lifelong bachelor who lived with his mother until her death in 1964, when he was 47.

Mr. Walters, the ultimate staff man, adapts completely to the needs and philosophy of his boss—

Democrats such as Harry Truman and Averell Harriman or Republicans such as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. "He isn't a deep thinker," says a friend, who was a top official in a previous administration. "He is a general whose basic tactic is to be deferential to senior authority."



Vernon Walters

During the student riots in Paris in 1968, Mr. Walters, chameleonlike, put on a French-tailored suit with his Legion of Honor boutonniere and strolled unnoticed and ignored along the Boulevard St. Germain. Also helping him blend in were his extraordinary linguistic skills. It's not just that Mr. Walters is fluent in seven foreign languages; he understands every nuance.

American officials say that when Mr. Walters briefs them for meetings with foreign leaders, he unintentionally mimics the person they will meet. He once briefed an administration official for a visit with Chilean President Augusto Pinochet. Mr. Walters predicted and portrayed Mr. Pinochet's opening remarks so precisely that the U.S. official had to suppress a smile when he met the Chilean leader. Friends say Mr. Walters also does excellent imitations of Francisco Franco, the late Spanish dictator; Cuban leader Fidel Castro, and Pope John Paul II.

Mr. Walters brings an operating style to his new job that differs markedly from that of his predecessor, Jeane Kirkpatrick. The outspoken Mrs. Kirkpatrick, with a strong conservative constituency of her own, wasn't reluctant to confront critics of U.S. policy. Mr. Walters prefers gentle persuasion. "I'm a great believer in personal relationships," says Mr. Walters, who during his recent four-year stint as the State Department's ambassador-at-large logged 1.4 million miles practicing the delicate art of diplomacy.

Already active on the U.N. cocktail circuit, he says, "I may not change many votes, but I hope there will be a lot of people who feel bad if they vote against us."

Mr. Walters's language proficiency has been the driving force in his career. Born in New York City, he moved with his family to Europe for 10 years when he was six and quickly learned French, Spanish, Italian and German. (He also speaks Dutch, Portuguese and Russian.) Back at home, he enlisted in the Army at the beginning of World War II. One night, while stationed at Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont, he was awakened by a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent standing over his bunk with

a flashlight. He offered Mr. Walters his first intelligence mission: to spy on some German refugees suspected of being enemy agents.

Thereafter, he was at the side of nearly every major figure of the postwar era as interpreter and aide. Gen. Mark Clark discovered him in Europe; then, Mr. Walters says, he was "offered" to Gen. George Marshall, who "recommended me" to President Truman. He was later "borrowed" by President Eisenhower. He kept minutes while an angry President Truman confronted Gen. Douglas MacArthur on Wake Island and sat with Mr. Eisenhower and French President Charles de Gaulle as they chatted by the fireplace in their bathrobes at Rambouillet Castle, near Paris. And when Richard Nixon was attacked by a mob in Caracas, Dick Walters was by his side in the limousine.

Such adventures—combined with his imitative skills—make Mr. Walters a masterly raconteur. Sitting in his office in New York, with a clear view of the U.N. across the street and the East River beyond, he talks at a rapid clip about one of his most dangerous missions. In 1973, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization killed two American diplomats in the Sudan, then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dispatched Mr. Walters to tell the PLO such actions wouldn't be tolerated.

Mr. Walters had some second thoughts about the mission. "I said, 'Dr. Kissinger, I must be No. 8 or 9 on their hit list,'" recalls Mr. Walters, who then was the CIA deputy director. He imitates the former secretary of state's German-accented reply: "But Walters, I'm No. 2; so, you're going."

The story also illustrates how Mr. Walters uses the enormous list of friendships and contacts made during a lifetime of globetrotting. The secret meeting with the PLO eventually was held in a palace in Morocco, whose ruler, King Hassan, has been a Walters friend since World War II, when Second Lt. Walters gave Crown Prince Hassan his first ride in an American tank.

Inevitably, though, a life filled with secret missions has cast some shadows on Dick Walters. In 1964, for example, he was defense attache in Brazil when a group of generals staged a coup and seized power. Mr. Walters's reports and predictions concerning the coup were so accurate that there were widespread suspicions—lingering to this day—that he helped direct the plot. On the day that the new president was inaugurated, he had lunch with then-Col. Walters; the two had been tent-mates in World War II when Mr. Walters was attached to the Brazilian Expeditionary Force in Europe.

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